

Childhood home, lost: The family evicted from the razed Fairmount carriage house



A carriage house at Fairmount, demolished last week by Rocklyn Development of Cicero: Historians believe it may have dated to the early 19th century. (Onondaga Historical Association | submitted photo)

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Matt Gonnella attends Saint Anselm College in New Hampshire on an academic and cross country scholarship. He's majoring in Spanish and international relations, and he'll intern this summer at the United Nations.

Still, when Matt left last August for another year of college, he figured he'd spend at least a few weeks of the coming summer at his childhood home in Fairmount.

Those plans were literally demolished. His old house is now rubble. For the past 13 years, Matt and his family were tenants in an old stone stable and carriage house on Chapel Drive, near Holy Family Church. The building, which dated to the 19th century, was a remnant of the original Fairmount estate that gave the area its name.

Matt's mother, Laurie Gonnella, raised four children there. In 2001, when the Gonnellas moved in, it was owned by Dr. John Sonne, who at the time ran the Fairmount Animal Hospital. But the veterinarians who now own the hospital sold the carriage house, last year, to Rocklyn Development of Cicero.

The Gonnellas have powerful memories of the carriage house. They could walk to church at Holy Family, where Laurie also cleans the rectory for the parish priest. For Matt and his siblings, the [legendary Fairmount Glen miniature golf course](#) was just down the hill. The Gonnellas also grew to love some of the architectural details and idiosyncracies in the house, such as a magnificent stone fireplace that dominated the living room and a classic phone booth, built into one wall.

Around New Year's Day, Laurie said, she received a notice giving her family 90 days to move out. Laurie, a single mother who cleans homes for the elderly, said she asked Rocklyn if she could have some leeway. She explained that her youngest daughter is in high school, she said, and Laurie wanted more time to find a home within the West Genesee school district.

In response, she said, she received an eviction notice, repeating that she had to be out by April 1.

Her apartment in the carriage house had four bedrooms, she said. She had to dispose of much her furniture and move to a smaller unit, where her daughters - for the first time - have to share a room. She was upset about leaving her home, but she never anticipated what came next:

Last week, Rocklyn razed the stone landmark.

"It needed some work," Laurie said. "It did not need to be knocked down."

No one seems sure of what will go up on the lot. Rocklyn officials did not return a call about their plans, and Camillus Supervisor Mary Ann Coogan said the company hasn't informed town officials of what it intends to build.

The demolition triggered shock waves among residents who valued the old building, a touch of deep Fairmount heritage amid a suburban commercial strip. Preservationists and historians were also caught by surprise.

About a year ago, the **Onondaga Historical Association** put up a sign on Chapel Drive that described the carriage house as the last piece of the Geddes farm. That estate was founded in the 18th century by James Geddes, a pioneering engineer who played a role in shaping the Erie Canal.



The Fairmount carriage house, once home to the

Gonnella family, after demolition. *Sean Kirst | skirst@syracuse.com*

The farm was raised to statewide prominence by his son George, a supporter of political movements for women's rights and the abolition of slavery. His

farming techniques were so progressive that legendary landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted visited, in 1846, for six months.

Dr. Richard Grambow, a retired veterinarian whose family lived for years in the converted carriage house, said he always wondered if the stone used for the stable was of the same variety as the canal.

Last week, those walls came down. Town officials said they had no power to stop the project. The building was not listed on the National Register of Historic Places, and there was no pertinent law demanding civic review before demolition.

Ted Bartlett, a senior associate with Crawford & Stearns Architects, is often involved with preservation questions. The best way of saving buildings like the carriage house, he said, would be for more communities to embrace the kind of system used in Syracuse.

In the city, any request to demolish a structure at least 50 years old triggers a staff review, said Kate Auwaerter, a preservation planner in City Hall. While those steps won't necessarily stop a bulldozer, they at least give a municipality a chance to react.

Coogan, in an email written Monday, said the idea might work in Camillus.

"Yes, I am sure the (town board) would be interested in such a policy," she wrote. "We would need to discuss it and look at other municipalities' policies ... I will begin the research."

In Fairmount, Ellen Edgerton -- a writer with deep knowledge of community history -- wonders if the logical reaction to losing the carriage house would be compiling a list of historic civic properties, thus creating a means to raise an alarm when a building is at risk.

Bob Haley, a Syracuse architect with decades of involvement in preservation, agreed that a more extensive survey of historic buildings is critical -- especially if those landmarks aren't elevated to the higher profile of the national register.



Historic market at the old Fairmount stable and carriage house, before the demolition. *Onondaga Historical Association | submitted photo*

"This thing was just tragic," Haley said. "What this shows is that there's a huge gap, countywide, in taking care of and identifying our historic resources."

By the end of summer, the state Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation hopes to have a digital list of statewide "National Register-eligible" buildings available for public review, said Dan Mackay, director of public policy for the [Preservation League of New York State](#) in Albany.

Once the site is public, Mackay said, it will give local communities the opportunity to begin finding "holes in the map," the threatened buildings that for whatever reason haven't made it to that list.

With the carriage house gone, historians and architects say the only way to respond is by hoping community sorrow over the decision can heighten the kind of awareness that might save the next endangered landmark.

That provides little consolation to the Gonnellas, who not only were evicted from a home they loved, but were stunned to learn it had been destroyed.

"That place had history, for the community and for our family," said Matt Gonnella. "Even when they told us to leave, we didn't think they'd knock it down."

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